

CHAPTER IV.

THE AGE OF MILTON.

1608-1674.

THE Elizabethan age proper closed with the death of the queen, and the accession of James I., in 1603, but the literature of the fifty years following was quite as rich as that of the half-century that had passed since she came to the throne, in 1557. The same qualities of thought and style which had marked the writers of her reign prolonged themselves in their successors, through the reigns of the first two Stuart kings and the Commonwealth. Yet there was a change in spirit. Literature is only one of the many forms in which the national mind expresses itself. In periods of political revolution, literature, leaving the serene air of fine art, partakes the violent agitation of the times. There were seeds of civil and religious discord in Elizabethan England. As between the two parties in the Church there was a compromise and a truce rather than a final settlement. The Anglican doctrine was partly Calvinistic and partly Arminian. The form of government was Episcopal, but there was a large body of Presbyterians in the Church who desired a change. In the ritual and ceremonies many "rags of popery" had been retained, which the extreme reformers wished to tear away. But Elizabeth was a worldly-minded woman, impatient of theological disputes. Though circumstances had made her the champion of Protestantism in Europe she kept many Catholic notions; disapproved, for example, of the marriage of priests, and hated sermons. She was jealous of her prerogative in the State, and in the Church she enforced uniformity. The authors of the *Martin Marprelate*

pamphlets against the bishops were punished by death or imprisonment. While the queen lived things were kept well together and England was at one in face of the common foe. Admiral Howard, who commanded the English naval forces against the Armada, was a Catholic.

But during the reign of James I. (1603-1625) and Charles I. (1625-1649) Puritanism grew stronger through repression. "England," says the historian Green, "became the people of a book, and that book the Bible." The power of the king was used to impose the power of the bishops upon the English and Scotch Churches until religious discontent became also political discontent, and finally overthrew the throne. The writers of this period divided more and more into two hostile camps. On the side of Church and king was the bulk of the learning and genius of the time. But on the side of free religion and the Parliament were the stern conviction, the fiery zeal, the exalted imagination of English Puritanism. The spokesman of this movement was Milton, whose great figure dominates the literary history of his generation, as Shakspeare does of the generation preceding.

The drama went on in the course marked out for it by Shakspeare's example until the theaters were closed by Parliament, in 1642. Of the Stuart dramatists the most important were Beaumont and Fletcher, all of whose plays were produced during the reign of James I. These were fifty-three in number, but only thirteen of them were joint productions. Francis Beaumont was twenty years younger than Shakspeare, and died a few years before him. He was the son of a judge of the Common Pleas. His collaborator, John Fletcher, a son of the bishop of London, was five years older than Beaumont, and survived him nine years. He was much the more prolific of the two and wrote alone some forty plays. Although the life of one of these partners was contemporaneous with Shakspeare's, their works exhibit a later phase

of the dramatic art. The Stuart dramatists followed the lead of Shakspeare rather than of Ben Jonson. Their plays, like the former's, belong to the romantic drama. They present a poetic and idealized version of life, deal with the highest passions and the wildest buffoonery, and introduce a great variety of those daring situations and incidents which we agree to call romantic. But, while Shakspeare seldom or never overstepped the modesty of nature, his successors ran into every license. They sought to stimulate the jaded appetite of their audience by exhibiting monstrosities of character, unnatural lusts, subtleties of crime, virtues and vices both in excess.

Beaumont and Fletcher's plays are much easier and more agreeable reading than Ben Jonson's. Though often loose in their plots and without that consistency in the development of their characters which distinguished Jonson's more conscientious workmanship, they are full of graceful dialogue and beautiful poetry. Dryden said that after the Restoration two of their plays were acted for one of Shakspeare's or Jonson's throughout the year, and he added that they "understood and imitated the conversation of gentlemen much better, whose wild debaucheries and quickness of wit in repartees no poet can ever paint as they have done." Wild debauchery was certainly not the mark of a gentleman in Shakspeare, nor was it altogether so in Beaumont and Fletcher. Their gentlemen are gallant and passionate lovers, gay cavaliers, generous, courageous, courteous—according to the fashion of their times—and sensitive on the point of honor. They are far superior to the cold-blooded rakes of Dryden and the Restoration comedy. Still the manners and language in Beaumont and Fletcher's plays are extremely licentious, and it is not hard to sympathize with the objections to the theater expressed by the Puritan writer, William Prynne, who, after denouncing the long hair of the cavaliers in his tract, *The Unloveliness of Lovelocks*, attacked the

stage, in 1633, with *Histrionastix: the Player's Scourge*; an offense for which he was fined, imprisoned, pilloried, and had his ears cropped. Coleridge said that Shakspeare was coarse, but never gross. He had the healthy coarseness of nature herself. But Beaumont and Fletcher's pages are corrupt. Even their chaste women are immodest in language and thought. They use not merely that frankness of speech which was a fashion of the times, but a profusion of obscene imagery which could not proceed from a pure mind. Chastity with them is rather a bodily accident than a virtue of the heart, says Coleridge.

Among the best of their light comedies are *The Chances*, *The Scornful Lady*, *The Spanish Curate*, and *Rule a Wife and Have a Wife*. But far superior to these are their tragedies and tragi-comedies, *The Maid's Tragedy*, *Philaster*, *A King and No King*—all written jointly—and *Valentinian* and *Thierry and Theodoret*, written by Fletcher alone, but perhaps, in part, sketched out by Beaumont. The tragic masterpiece of Beaumont and Fletcher is *The Maid's Tragedy*, a powerful but repulsive play, which sheds a singular light not only upon its authors' dramatic methods, but also upon the attitude toward royalty favored by the doctrine of the divine right of kings, which grew up under the Stuarts. The heroine, Evadne, has been in secret a mistress of the king, who marries her to Amintor, a gentleman of his court, because, as she explains to her bridegroom, on the wedding night,

I must have one
To father children, and to bear the name
Of husband to me, that my sin may be
More honorable.

This scene is, perhaps, the most affecting and impressive in the whole range of Beaumont and Fletcher's drama. Yet when Evadne names the king as her paramour, Amintor exclaims:

O thou hast named a word that wipes away
 All thoughts revengeful. In that sacred name
 "The king" there lies a terror. What frail man
 Dares lift his hand against it? Let the gods
 Speak to him when they please; till when, let us
 Suffer and wait.

And the play ends with the words

On lustful kings,
 Unlooked-for sudden deaths from heaven are sent,
 But cursed is he that is their instrument.

Aspatia, in this tragedy, is a good instance of Beaumont and Fletcher's pathetic characters. She is troth-plight wife to Amintor, and after he, by the king's command, has forsaken her for Evadne, she disguises herself as a man, provokes her unfaithful lover to a duel, and dies under his sword, blessing the hand that killed her. This is a common type in Beaumont and Fletcher, and was drawn originally from Shakspeare's Ophelia. All their good women have the instinctive fidelity of a dog, and a superhuman patience and devotion, a "gentle forlornness" under wrongs, which is painted with an almost feminine tenderness. In *Philaster, or Love Lies Bleeding*, Euphrasia, conceiving a hopeless passion for Philaster—who is in love with Arethusa—puts on the dress of a page and enters his service. He employs her to carry messages to his lady-love, just as Viola, in *Twelfth Night*, is sent by the duke to Olivia. Philaster is persuaded by slanderers that his page and his lady have been unfaithful to him, and in his jealous fury he wounds Euphrasia with his sword. Afterward, convinced of the boy's fidelity, he asks forgiveness, whereto Euphrasia replies,

Alas, my lord, my life is not a thing
 Worthy your noble thoughts. 'Tis not a life,
 'Tis but a piece of childhood thrown away.

Beaumont and Fletcher's love-lorn maids wear the willow very sweetly, but in all their piteous passages there is

nothing equal to the natural pathos—the pathos which arises from the deep springs of character—of that one brief question and answer in *King Lear*.

Lear. So young and so untender?
Cordelia.

So young, my lord, and true.

The disguise of a woman in man's apparel is a common incident in the romantic drama; and the fact that on the Elizabethan stage the female parts were taken by boys made the deception easier. Viola's situation in *Twelfth Night* is precisely similiar to Euphrasia's, but there is a difference in the handling of the device which is characteristic of a distinction between Shakspeare's art and that of his contemporaries. The audience in *Twelfth Night* is taken into confidence and made aware of Viola's real nature from the start, while Euphrasia's *incognito* is preserved till the fifth act, and then disclosed by an accident. This kind of mystification and surprise was a trick below Shakspeare. In this instance, moreover, it involved a departure from dramatic probability. Euphrasia could, at any moment, by revealing her identity, have averted the greatest sufferings and dangers from Philaster, Arethusa, and herself, and the only motive for her keeping silence is represented to have been a feeling of maidenly shame at her position. Such strained and fantastic motives are too often made the pivot of the action in Beaumont and Fletcher's tragi-comedies. Their characters have not the depth and truth of Shakspeare's, nor are they drawn so sharply. One reads their plays with pleasure, and remembers here and there a passage of fine poetry, or a noble or lovely trait, but their characters, as wholes, leave a fading impression. Who, even after a single reading or representation, ever forgets Falstaff, or Shylock, or King Lear?

The moral inferiority of Beaumont and Fletcher is well seen in such a play as *A King and No King*. Here Arbaces

falls in love with his sister, and, after a furious conflict in his own mind, finally succumbs to his guilty passion. He is rescued from the consequences of his weakness by the discovery that Panthea is not, in fact, his sister. But this is to cut the knot and not to untie it. It leaves the denouement to chance, and not to those moral forces through which Shakspeare always wrought his conclusions. Arbaces has failed, and the piece of luck which keeps his failure innocent is rejected by every right-feeling spectator. In one of John Ford's tragedies the situation which in *A King and No King* is only apparent becomes real, and incest is boldly made the subject of the play. Ford pushed the morbid and unnatural in character and passion into even wilder extremes than Beaumont and Fletcher. His best play, the *Broken Heart*, is a prolonged and unrelieved torture of the feelings.

Fletcher's *Faithful Shepherdess* is the best English pastoral drama with the exception of Jonson's fragment, the *Sad Shepherd*. Its choral songs are richly and sweetly modulated, and the influence of the whole poem upon Milton is very apparent in his *Comus*. The *Knight of the Burning Pestle*, written by Beaumont and Fletcher jointly, was the first burlesque comedy in the language, and is excellent fooling. Beaumont and Fletcher's blank verse is musical, but less masculine than Marlowe's or Shakspeare's, by reason of their excessive use of extra syllables and feminine endings.

In John Webster the fondness for abnormal and sensational themes, which beset the Stuart stage, showed itself in the exaggeration of the terrible into the horrible. Fear, in Shakspeare—as in the great murder scene in *Macbeth*—is a pure passion; but in Webster it is mingled with something physically repulsive. Thus his *Duchess of Malfi* is presented in the dark with a dead man's hand, and is told that it is the hand of her murdered husband. She is shown a dance of mad-men and, "behind a traverse, the artificial figures of her

children, appearing as if dead." Treated in this elaborate fashion, that "terror," which Aristotle said it was one of the objects of tragedy to move, loses half its dignity. Webster's images have the smell of the charnel house about them:

She would not after the report keep fresh
As long as flowers on graves.

We are only like dead walls or vaulted graves,
That, ruined, yield no echo.

O this gloomy world!
In what a shadow or deep pit of darkness
Doth womanish and fearful mankind live!

Webster had an intense and somber genius. In diction he was the most Shaksperian of the Elizabethan dramatists, and there are sudden gleams of beauty among his dark horrors which light up a whole scene with some abrupt touch of feeling.

Cover her face: mine eyes dazzle: she died young,

says the brother of the Duchess, when he has procured her murder and stands before the corpse. *Vittoria Corombona* is described in the old editions as "a night-piece," and it should, indeed, be acted by the shuddering light of torches, and with the cry of the screech-owl to punctuate the speeches. The scene of Webster's two best tragedies was laid, like many of Ford's, Cyril Tourneur's, and Beaumont and Fletcher's, in Italy—the wicked and splendid Italy of the Renaissance, which had such a fascination for the Elizabethan imagination. It was to them the land of the Borgias and the Cenci; of families of proud nobles, luxurious, cultivated, but full of revenge and ferocious cunning; subtle poisoners, who killed with a perfumed glove or fan; parricides, atheists, committers of unnamable crimes, and inventors of strange and delicate varieties of sin.

But a very few have here been mentioned of the great host of dramatists who kept the theaters busy through the

reigns of Elizabeth, James I., and Charles I. The last of the race was James Shirley, who died in 1666, and whose thirty-eight plays were written during the reign of Charles I. and the Commonwealth.

In the miscellaneous prose and poetry of this period there is lacking the free, exulting, creative impulse of the elder generation, but there are a soberer feeling and a certain scholarly choiceness which commend themselves to readers of bookish tastes. Even that quaintness of thought which is a mark of the Commonwealth writers is not without its attraction for a nice literary palate. Prose became now of greater relative importance than ever before. Almost every distinguished writer lent his pen to one or the other party in the great theological and political controversy of the time. There were famous theologians, like Hales, Chillingworth, and Baxter; historians and antiquaries, like Selden, Knolles, and Cotton; philosophers, such as Hobbes, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, and More, the Platonist; and writers in natural science—which now entered upon its modern, experimental phase, under the stimulus of Bacon's writings—among whom may be mentioned Wallis, the mathematician; Boyle, the chemist; and Harvey, the discoverer of the circulation of the blood. These are outside of our subject, but in the strictly literary prose of the time, the same spirit of roused inquiry is manifest, and the same disposition to a thorough and exhaustive treatment of a subject, which is proper to the scientific attitude of mind. The line between true and false science, however, had not yet been drawn. The age was pedantic, and appealed too much to the authority of antiquity. Hence we have such monuments of perverse and curious erudition as Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 1621; and Sir Thomas Browne's *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, or *Inquiries into Vulgar and Common Errors*, 1646. The former of these was the work of an Oxford scholar, an astrologer, who cast his own horoscope,

and a victim himself of the atrabilious humor, from which he sought relief in listening to the ribaldry of bargemen, and in compiling this *Anatomy*, in which the causes, symptoms, prognostics, and cures of melancholy are considered in numerous partitions, sections, members, and subsections. The work is a mosaic of quotations. All literature is ransacked for anecdotes and instances, and the book has thus become a mine of out-of-the-way learning in which later writers have dug. Lawrence Sterne helped himself freely to Burton's treasures, and Dr. Johnson said that the *Anatomy* was the only book that ever took him out of bed two hours sooner than he wished to rise.

The vulgar and common errors which Sir Thomas Browne set himself to refute were such as these: That dolphins are crooked, that Jews stink, that a man hath one rib less than a woman, that Xerxes's army drank up rivers, that cicades are bred out of cuckoo-spittle, that Hannibal split Alps with vinegar, together with many similar fallacies touching Pope Joan, the Wandering Jew, the decuman or tenth wave, the blackness of negroes, Friar Bacon's brazen head, etc. Another book in which great learning and ingenuity were applied to trifling ends was the same author's *Garden of Cyrus; or, the Quincuncial Lozenge or Network Plantations of the Ancients*, in which a mystical meaning is sought in the occurrence throughout nature and art of the figure of the quincunx or lozenge. Browne was a physician of Norwich, where his library, museum, aviary, and botanic garden were thought worthy of a special visit by the Royal Society. He was an antiquary and a naturalist, and deeply read in the school-men and the Christian Fathers. He was a mystic, and a writer of a rich and peculiar imagination, whose thoughts have impressed themselves upon many kindred minds, like Coleridge, De Quincey, and Emerson. Two of his books belong to literature, *Religio Medici*, published in 1642, and *Hydriotaphia; or, Urn Burial*, 1658, a discourse